

Under Observation

IN THE LOOP

By Al Kamen

GUARDIANS OF THE GUANO

Planning a little scuba diving trip to scenic Navassa Island, a two-square-mile uninhabited piece of U.S. property 40 miles west of Haiti? The Interior Department is making it as tough as possible.

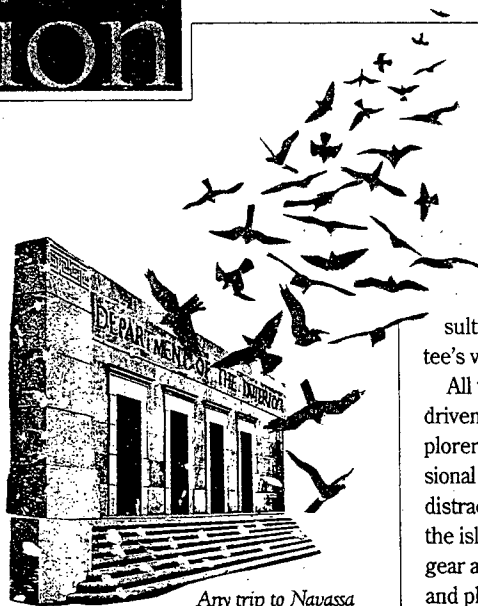
The department has issued regulations banning diving, snorkeling or even swimming "in the waters surrounding Navassa Island." Well, how about just camping on the island, which is covered with petrified guano, or seabird droppings?

That's fine, says a memo from **Joseph H. McDermott**, an official in Interior's Office of Insular Affairs, as long as you abide by a handy list of 20 simple requirements.

First, you must prove you have had a physical exam "by a licensed physician." And "all camping gear must be new and never been used previously." All your gear and supplies, except for cameras and such, "must be frozen for at least 72 hours" before landing or "tented and fumigated."

McDermott is especially worried that seeds will be brought onto the island and disrupt the fragile ecology. So absolutely no "fresh tomatoes of any kind" are allowed, because they can grow well in the salt spray. Ditto "alfalfa, mustard [forget the Grey Poupon for the hot dogs], cress or sunflower seeds."

Most important, "all footwear, e.g. shoes, slippers, socks, must be NEW, unused and carefully sealed and stored" prior to land-



Any trip to Navassa Island has to go through the Department of the Interior.

ing. "The permittee shall avoid using shoes, socks or clothing that is fuzzy and prone to picking up seeds."

No photographs or film can be used "for commercial purposes," McDermott says, and "the Office of Insular Affairs or the Department of the Interior must be credited in writing or, as appropriate, verbally in any article, publication or production, including a media interview re-

sulting from the permittee's visit to Navassa Island."

All this, needless to say, has driven sunken-treasure explorer and would-be congressional candidate **Bill Warren** to distraction. "I've sent people to the island with used camping gear and ordered them to swim and plant tomatoes," he says. Readers may recall that the California Republican is trying to claim the deserted island under the 1856 Guano Act, which says any unclaimed and uninhabited island anywhere in the world with guano on it can be claimed as U.S. territory.

That was what American sea captain Peter Duncan did in 1857—over the protests of the Haitians—and the Navassa Phosphate Co. in Baltimore promptly began mining the guano phosphate, a great fer-

tilizer and mainstay of U.S. agriculture in the 1900s, according to historian David Billington. He's put up a Web site on the history of the island.

The mine was a sizable operation, with 140 African American contract laborers from Baltimore, directed by white supervisors, dynamiting and digging out the guano and hauling it in rail cars to a landing point for shipment.

The laborers, much abused, eventually rebelled, and five supervisors died in the fighting. Three miners, after trials in Baltimore, were to be executed in 1891, but a petition by black churches led President **Benjamin Harrison** to commute the sentences to imprisonment.

The Coast Guard maintained an unmanned lighthouse until 1996, and now the place is deserted except for lizards, feral goats and occasional Haitian fishermen cleaning their catches.

Given all the human activity a century ago—from dynamite to homicide—what's Interior's big concern about visitors wearing old shoes while walking on acres of bird doo-doo?

The regulations, Interior spokesman David North explains, are "designed among other things to keep the island as undefiled as possible" by further visitors—to "keep it pristine."

A group of scientists are to return this week from a two-week trip to Navassa. "There is a possibility," McDermott wrote Warren recently in response to his request to visit Navassa, that the group may recommend that Interior "prohibit all visits not directly connected with protecting the island's ecology."

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